

CANADA'S OWN RIFLE

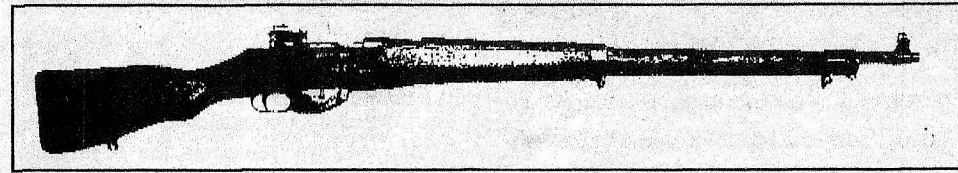
In 1896 40,000 of the Magazine Lee-Enfield rifle (MLE) were purchased from Britain to equip the militia: This rifle, known as the the Long Lee, was issued to Canadian troops during the South African war. Canada sought to acquire a further 15,000 units in 1900 but by then Britain was embroiled in that conflict and was unable to fulfill the order. The Canadian Government then decided on the course of manufacturing its own weapon and in 1902 a contract was signed to supply 12,000 a year of a .303 straight-pull bolt action rifle designed by Scotsman Sir Charles Ross. A factory was built on a 25 acre site outside Quebec City and after labour disputes and component problems had slowed down output the first Mark I rifles were produced in 1905. A number of design modifications were made after complaints by the first customers, the Royal North West Mounted Police resulting in the Mark II. This model itself underwent over 80 modifications and by the time the Mark III pattern, the standard version, began production in 1911 barrel length and weight had increased (as well as cost). The Ross thereby went against the general trend to a shorter muzzle length weapon. To put this in context it is necessary to recall that in Britain production of the 44.5" Short Magazine Lee-Enfield (SMLE) to replace both the Magazine Lee-Enfield and the Lee-Enfield Carbine had begun as far back as 1903.

By the outbreak of war in 1914 12,000 Mark III Ross rifles had been delivered and orders placed for a further 30,000.

Although the Ross had rapidly gained repute as a target rifle, eg at Bisley between 1909 and 1913, complaints about serious defects began to be heard from training camps. Despite this and the ongoing debate between the relative merits of the Ross and the SMLE, the 1st Canadian Division went to France in Spring 1915 armed with the Mark III rifle. There were two exceptions among Canadian units; the Divisional Cavalry for whom the weapon was too long and the PPCLI who, fighting alongside British troops in the Imperial 27th Division, had swapped for Lee-Enfields before leaving for France.

In action a number of defects surfaced again, most seriously that the rifle would jam after firing British made ammunition (all that was available in quantity at the time). The chamber of the Ross was slightly smaller than the SMLE and the composition of the brass of the British cartridge case softer so that it expanded and could not be readily extracted. This problem was compounded by the straight-pull Mauser action which exerted less force than the Lee-Enfield bolt lever acting on a screw thread. All this gave rise to those images during Second Ypres of troops kicking open the rifle bolt with their feet and casting away their Ross in exchange for the Lee-Enfields of the British dead: It was found that after that battle 1/3 of the 5000 survivors had armed themselves with the SMLE. After extensive tests, 44,000 Ross rifles were re-chambered but the problem was never entirely cured.

Meanwhile in June 1915 the 1st Canadian Division had been ordered to hand in their Ross rifles in exchange for Mark III SMLE's. Although forbidden to do so, 2nd and 3rd Division troops proceeded



to acquire unauthorized Lee-Enfields for themselves.

In Spring 1916 General Alderson (Corps Commander) was asked by Major-General Watkin to comment on adverse remarks about the Ross and in his reply to Ottawa submitted 10 reasons why 85% of his troops did not like the weapon. This communication drew from Sam Hughes, the Minister of Militia - and as a member of the original adoption committee a champion of "his" rifle - a strong response and rebuke to Alderson which he circulated to all colonels. The gist of his argument was that it had been "criminal" to supply defective ammunition to the troops and that better training with the weapon would lead to more effective use; ie the rifle, as such, was not to blame. Alderson reacted by taking a poll of the 2nd and 3rd Divisions and reporting the results to the C-in-C, Sir Douglas Haig who recommended that these divisions be officially equipped with the SMLE pattern III or III*. The Canadian Government concurred; rearmament of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Divisions took place in August and September 1916 and Sam Hughes was dismissed a short while later.

Thus wartime production of rifles in Canada came to an end after some 420,000 had been fabricated. The contract with Ross was cancelled and after legal action a settlement of \$2million was paid over by the government. Plans to manufacture the SMLE did not come to fruition but it was of little

consequence as Canada's needs could now be met out of British production. The Ross did not go completely out of use; the USA used them for training in 1917-18 and the Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force used the Mark III Ross in 1918-19. Between the wars the rifle continued as a training weapon and was even used as a sniper's tool during the Second World War. Thus its use outlived the life of its inventor who died in 1942.

Although the Ross was always better as a target rifle than an infantryman's weapon, one wonders if there had been adopted a more temperate approach to the issues, less bound up with politics, whether it would have been possible to constructively review and correct many of the problems of a fundamentally useful weapon.

Sources: "The Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War" by G.W.L. Nicholson, Queen's Printer, Ottawa, 1962.

"The Canadian Ross Rifle" by E. Storey, Stand To! (Journal of the Western Front Association Number 52), 1998.

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